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Tighe to assess handling of reports of live POWs

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Retired Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, will review DIA files to determine whether the agency has properly handled reports of live POWs in Southeast Asia, he said yesterday.

The review was prompted by the widespread belief that live U.S. prisoners may still be held in Southeast Asia. The reports are largely unsubstantiated, but military officials are not entirely ruling out the possibility.

The issue will come up next week in hearings before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. Some committee members spent part of the Christmas break in Southeast Asia to see if there is any validity to the reports.

"We didn't see much encouragement about that belief, but that

doesn't mean American men are not still in Vietnam or Laos," Sen. Frank Murkowski, Alaska Republican and head of the delegation, said yesterday.

"Other foreign ministers" who traveled through remote parts of the country "indicated no Americans are being held in Vietnam," he said.

Vietnamese officials agreed to continue efforts to find the remains of more than 2,400 American servicemen lost during the prolonged conflict, Mr. Murkowski said.

In addition, he said residents reported more than 50 possible sites where remains of MIAs could be found, but it is unclear if all these locations will be excavated.

Until representatives from a neutral country are allowed to investigate the persistent rumors about "live sightings," Americans should continue to press for proof, he said.

"While we still have hope, we have to recognize that 13 years have past," Mr. Murkowski said at a news con-

ference. "But we should continue to make our demands."

Gen. Tighe said he is reviewing the files at the request of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, DIA Director Lt. Gen. Leonard H. Perroots, and Rep. John McCain, Arizona Republican.

A spokesman for Mr. Weinberger's office said that no formal invitation had been made from Mr. Weinberger to Gen. Tighe.

But a Nov. 15 letter from Mr. Weinberger to Mr. McCain acknowledges that Mr. McCain requested that Gen. Tighe be recalled to active duty "for the appropriate length of time that is necessary for him to re-examine the existing evidence and be updated on the live sightings issue."

"Your suggestion . . . has considerable merit, even in light of the considerable care with which pertinent information has been examined. . . ." Mr. Weinberger wrote.

"We propose, however, a slightly different course of action. Lt. Gen. Perroots, the present director of DIA and a long-time friend of Gen. Tighe, has already offered Gen. Tighe access to DIA's files on significant POW/MIA live-sightings cases. There is no need to recall Gen. Tighe to active duty to allow him access to DIA's classified information."

Mr. McCain said he suggested that Gen. Tighe be returned to active duty after he heard the general's testimony last summer before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Gen. Tighe testified at the time that he believed live Americans were being held in Southeast Asia.

In addition, he testified that his beliefs were based on live-sighting reports which had crossed his desk while he was head of the DIA.

"It is our understanding that Gen. Tighe's beliefs are based upon the weight of evidence, although he has

previously cited three reports (which were unsubstantiated by DIA) to back up his statements," wrote Mr. Weinberger in his letter to Mr. McCain.

"When someone like Gen. Tighe speaks, you have to listen," said Mr. McCain.

Gen. Tighe said he would be given access to DIA files on significant live-sighting cases. "I'm going to see if the reports were handled properly, and properly evaluated," he said.

"I hope he does more than that," said Mr. McCain. "I hope he will identify reports he has questions about so we can pursue them and check them out."

Sen. Dennis DeConcini, Arizona Democrat and member of the bipartisan delegation, said Vietnamese officials believe some residents are using the remains of U.S. servicemen as bargaining chips to win permission to leave the country.